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5-4-1990

### Dropping teacher test would lower educational standards, UM dean says

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#### Recommended Citation

University of Montana--Missoula. Office of University Relations, "Dropping teacher test would lower educational standards, UM dean says" (1990). *University of Montana News Releases, 1928, 1956-present*. 11973.

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# University of Montana

## NEWS RELEASE

Office of News and Publications  
Missoula, MT 59812  
(406) 243-2522

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May 4, 1990

### DROPPING TEACHER TEST WOULD LOWER EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS, UM DEAN SAYS

By Carol Susan Woodruff  
UM News and Publications

"Montana will become a dumping ground for teachers who can't get a job anywhere else" if the state Board of Public Education adopts a proposal freeing teachers from taking a national test to secure temporary certification, charged the dean of the University of Montana School of Education.

Adopting the proposal, made April 26 by Office of Public Instruction Deputy Superintendent Jack Copps, would mean violating the board's oath to uphold high-quality education for the state's students, Dean John Pulliam said.

Such a move would show willingness to "expose our children to teachers who have not demonstrated by any reasonable measure that they are competent to teach," he added.

The National Teacher Examinations, a two-part test covering teaching methods and basic skills in math, science and English, are now required for teachers seeking both permanent and provisional certificates. The provisional ones, good for up to five years and non-renewable, are issued in cases where an educator has what Copps calls "minor deficiencies that need to be taken care of." For example, an administrator coming to a Montana school from out of state might need to take a course required here in administration and guidance services, he said.     - more -



Copps proposed the change largely in an attempt to make it easier to fill jobs -- especially in secondary schools -- in cities like Miles City, Poplar, Wolf Point, Glendive and Sidney. The board will consider the proposal June 7 or 8, he said.

Currently, a job opening in eastern Montana might draw 25 applicants, 22 or 23 of them from out of state, Copps said. Many teachers recruited for jobs in that part of the state come from North Dakota, where the test isn't required.

"The whole reason behind this (move to eliminate the test requirement) is people in eastern Montana don't feel they have access to a pool of quality applicants with the NTE in place," he said. "Montana teachers aren't applying in large enough numbers."

Attracting teachers to small, rural areas is a problem, Pulliam acknowledged. Higher pay might offer teachers a greater incentive to work there, he said. But teacher shortages in some areas don't warrant excusing teachers from the test, he said. He likens the situation to letting people practice law without having passed the bar examination.

All but a handful of states require the NTE for all teachers, Pulliam said. Although Copps said states bordering Montana don't require the test, Pulliam said Wyoming and Idaho do require it for all teachers.

The two men differ markedly in their view of the usefulness of the test.

"The NTE (offers) the absolute minimum evidence of competence to



teach," Pulliam said. "Some people pass who don't do well in the classroom. But if they can't pass, it immediately throws up a red flag."

The test isn't hard, Pulliam continued. "A good high school graduate could pass it."

A math question from a past test, included in the Educational Testing Service's study guide for the NTE, seems to illustrate Pulliam's point: "If M is twice N, then N is a)  $1/2$  M; b) twice M; c) two less than M; d) two more than M; e) M minus  $1/2$ ."

"Our students do extremely well on (the NTE)," Pulliam said. "About 95 percent pass the first time with no problem."

The people most likely to fill teaching jobs if the test were abolished would be "people who came out of marginal programs a long time ago and probably cannot pass the NTE," he said.

He hastened to add that he doesn't oppose alternative certification. Faced with teacher shortages, some states -- including Tennessee -- have begun offering excellent programs in which a person with a bachelor's degree can be certified to teach after taking an intensive, one-year course and passing the NTE.

Unlike Pulliam, Copps dismisses the national test as being of no value in determining a teacher's worth.

"I think there's a general consensus that the NTE doesn't provide any kind of legitimate measure as to whether a person will be a good teacher or a poor teacher," Copps said.

He advocates testing students before they enter education school



rather than after they graduate.

"In all fairness to the prospective teacher, why put them through a teacher-education program and set them up for failure?" Copps asked. "Why not take care of the problems early on?"

As Copps pointed out, a number of colleges and universities -- UM among them -- already test students' basic skills before admitting them to education school.

Before taking any education courses except the introductory one, UM students must pass the basic-skills part of the NTE, have at least a 2.5 grade-point average and experience with children, and put in writing why they want to teach. After graduating, they must pass the teaching-methods part of the test before becoming certified teachers.

In addition, to retain accreditation by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, UM's education school must meet hundreds of standards set by that council and the state Board of Public Education. About a year ago, the board strengthened and greatly increased its number of standards.

"What I'm particularly upset about is lowering standards for people who come in from out of state while raising standards of teachers trained in state," Pulliam said. The board "is opening up the back door at the same time it's building a bigger lock on the front door."

The move to get rid of the test requirement for provisional certification is only the beginning, Copps said. Members of his office, state school boards and the Montana Education Association are



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becoming increasingly interested in eliminating the test requirement for permanent certification as well.

That news doesn't surprise Pulliam.

"I really think that the board now is doing things that aren't in the best interests of the children of Montana," he said.

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